



Excerpt taken from:

Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity

By Katherine Boo

Preview available through Google Books.



Context: At the opening of the book, one of the characters, Abdul, tries to find a place to hide from the police. He has done something wrong, but exactly what, is unknown.

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MIDNIGHT WAS CLOSING IN, the one-legged woman was grievously burned, and the Mumbai police were coming for Abdul and his father. In a slum hut by the international airport, Abdul's parents came to a decision with an uncharacteristic economy of words. The father, a sick man, would wait inside the trash-strewn, tin-roofed shack where the family of eleven resided. He'd go quietly when arrested. Abdul, the household earner, was the one who had to flee.

Abdul's opinion of this plan had not been solicited, typically. Already he was mule-brained with panic. He was sixteen years old, or maybe nineteen – his parents were hopeless with dates. Allah, in His impenetrable wisdom, had cut him small and jumpy. A coward: Abdul said it of himself. He knew nothing about eluding policemen. What he knew about, mainly was trash. For nearly all the waking hours of nearly all the years he could remember, he'd been buying and selling to recyclers the things that richer people threw away.

Now Abdul grasped the need to disappear, but beyond that his imagination flagged. He took off running, then came back home. The only place he could think to hide was in his garbage.

He cracked the door of the family hut and looked out. His home sat midway down a row of hand-built, spatchcock dwellings; the lopsided shed where he stowed his trash was just next door. To reach this shed unseen would deprive his neighbours of the pleasure of turning him in to the police.

He didn't like the moon, though: full and stupid bright, illuminating a dusty open lot in front of his home. Across the lot were the shacks of two dozen other families, and Abdul feared he wasn't the only person peering out from behind the cover of a plywood door. Some people in this slum wished his family ill because of the old Hindu-Muslim resentments. Others resented his family for the modern reason, economic envy. Doing waste work that many Indians found contemptible, Abdul had lifted his large family above subsistence.

The open lot was quiet, at least—freakishly so. A kind of beachfront for a vast pool of sewage that marked the slum's eastern border, the place was bedlam most nights: people fighting, cooking, flirting, bathing, tending goats, playing cricket, waiting for water at a public tap, lining up outside a little brothel, or sleeping off the effects of the grave-digging liquor dispensed from a hut two doors down from Abdul's own. The pressures that built up in crowded huts on narrow slumlanes had only this place, the *maidan*, to escape. But after the fight, and the burning of the woman called the One Leg, people had retreated to their huts.

Now, among the feral pigs, water buffalo, and the usual belly-down splay of alcoholics, there seemed to be just one watchful presence: a small, unspookable boy from Nepal. He was sitting, arms around knees, in a sparingly blue haze by the sewage lake—the reflected neon signage of a luxury hotel across the water. Abdul didn't mind if the Nepali boy saw him go into hiding.